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Summit Meetings, Past and Present, Are Grist to an American Historian

By ADAM CLYMER

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WASHINGTON, July 24 — The practice of diplomatic history requires reading and rereading all previous books on an era, examining thousands of pages of documents, and relentlessly requesting authorities to release more.

Then, says Michael R. Beschloss, "you think very hard about whether you would reach different conclusions from what the people who came before you thought."

Mr. Beschloss often thinks hard that way. He is not only one of the leading practitioners of the diminishing art of diplomatic history. He makes a living at it, writing about past summit meetings and commenting for the Cable News Network on current ones, like the meeting with President Mikhail S. Gorbachev that President Bush heads for on Monday.

The research of the diplomatic historian consists of intense slogging. There is almost never a single dramatic find, one document, that leads to a cry of 'Eureka!'

"Usually if a historic current is important, you'll find evidence of it elsewhere," Mr. Beschloss said. But in the case of his new book, "The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963," there was the equivalent of what he calls a Eureka archive.

A Soviet Trove Opens

The coming of glasnost, and Mr. Gorbachev's concerns about accidental war, led to Soviet re-examination of the period when the superpowers came closest to nuclear war, first over Berlin and then over Cuba. Beginning in 1987, Soviet participants in the events of the early 1960's, or their children, were suddenly allowed, even directed, to tell their stories. And those sources led Mr. Beschloss, 35 years old, to a revisionist interpretation of the early 1960's.

Contrary to the view he and most Americans shared for so long, of a reckless Nikita S. Khrushchev threatening nuclear war for no apparent reason and a composed, steel-nerved John F. Kennedy firmly guiding this country and the world away from the abyss, "Kennedy and the United States had at least as great a responsibility," Mr. Beschloss writes. The signals they gave were uncertain, he found, and their secret campaign against Cuba, including assassination plans aimed at Fidel Castro, alarmed the Kremlin.

Although the Soviet sources were an unexpected bonus, giving him more than the expected "logic and speculation" to explain Mr. Khrushchev, Mr. Beschloss began the book when he did, in 1985, in the great hope, he says, "that I would be able to benefit from the fact that declassified American documents tend to come tumbling out about 25 to 30 years after an event occurs."

Many did. One key that did not come loose without a struggle, however, was the translator's notes from the 1961 Kennedy-Khrushchev summit meeting in Vienna.

Mr. Beschloss made five requests for the notes, from mid-1986 until they were released in September of last year. What did they add?

"There was nothing earth-shattering," he said, but the "virtually a word for word" account of two days of talks gave a feel for the meeting, and in particular a sense that "Kennedy's Cuba language was vague enough to have contributed" to Mr. Khrushchev's belief that he could get away with putting missiles on the island.

The Mystery Is Less

Summit meetings like that one, and next week's too, become public in three stages, Mr. Beschloss said.

First, Mr. Kennedy and his people leaked versions of conversations to favored reporters. The Kennedy quote, "It's going to be a cold winter," was peddled to give the impression that the President was tough all the way through — tougher than the full transcript revealed. Later heavily paraphrased, more thoughtful, but basically friendly versions came out in the books by Administration insiders like Theodore Sorenson and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Then come the uninvolved, professional historians' accounts.

There may be less incentive for a diplomatic historian to explore next week's Bush-Gorbachev summit meeting. There is less mystery to explore. "In the early 1960's, there really was such a thing as secret diplomacy," Mr. Beschloss said. "For instance, John Kennedy could make a deal with Nikita Khrushchev on the basis of a promise to remove Western missiles from Turkey and expect it to remain secret."

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But if a Western leader had seriously considered letting President Saddam Hussein of Iraq have the Persian Gulf islands in exchange for leaving Kuwait, he would have to expect the agreement to become public, Mr. Beschloss said. "Much more diplomacy takes place in public," he said, adding, "When the history of the gulf war is written in 30 years from now, there probably will be fewer surprises."

The raw material of diplomatic history is also changing. "The moment you really see it happening is 1960," Mr. Beschloss said. "Eisenhower wrote letters. You could write volumes from his letters."

The Effect of Computers

Things changed in 1961. "Kennedy did business by the telephone," he said. Moreover, some written records of important meetings, like those of the National Security Council, were kept badly in the Kennedy Administration. Other records, including those of oral messages for Khrushchev that Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy gave Georgi N. Bolshakov, a Soviet intelligence agent at the embassy here, were hardly kept at all.

And then there are computers. Not only are messages that might figure in diplomatic history sent on them. They have changed the process of assembling that history. Using a sort function, for example, Mr. Beschloss can have the computer bring together everything in his notes that refers to events on a given date, or everything involving a particular person. Before they had computers, historians often spent months sorting and resorting file cards.

For "The Crisis Years," which HarperCollins put out in June, Mr. Beschloss dealt with perhaps 1,500 books and 100,000 pages of documents. "I try to rely very much on documents as opposed to interviews," he said. "Otherwise it would be more journalism and less history."

But the interviews mattered and the two he regards as most valuable were with McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Kennedy's national security adviser, and Richard M. Helms, a former Director of Central Intelligence. "They were central players who knew much of what was going on," he said. "At this late date they felt more free to speak candidly and voluminously."

Why the Two Talked Tough

The rough symmetry in understanding both sides that the Soviet sources provide is the strength of the work. Mr. Beschloss claims little for himself, saying he had "the luck of writing this book" when they were newly available. But he took great advantage of that profound change.

Another symmetry that emerges is

a view of Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev as two leaders who talked, and sometimes acted, tough to overcome domestic political weakness, expecting the other to understand but showing no such understanding of his own.

Take early January 1961, when Mr. Khrushchev gave a speech on wars of national liberation, using harsh cold war words but not deeds to throw a bone to hard-liners. Mr. Kennedy perceived a deliberate effort to test a new, young President, and responded in kind in his State of the Union address.

Then there was the speech, in October, by Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, on American nuclear superiority. Mr. Kennedy's motive in authorizing it, Mr. Beschloss says, was to seem strong at home on the eve of negotiations on Berlin. But Mr. Khrushchev thought Mr. Kennedy was advertising strength to set the stage for a possible nuclear first strike that would overcome his domestic political weakness. Missiles in Cuba were the response.

Most of the writing was done at home, in a Cleveland Park house once owned by Loy Henderson, a diplomat of the era he writes about. His office has a 1987 model Compaq computer on an otherwise sparsely littered desk. There are bookcases and boxes of computer disks, and on the wall a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. He honors Lincoln, certainly no main figure of diplomatic history, because "he is the greatest of our Presidents in my view."

"When you grow up in Illinois," he said, "the memory and legacy of Lincoln is particularly holy."

His Career Course

A protégé of James McGregor Burns, Mr. Beschloss wrote his senior college thesis on Joseph P. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt; it was published three years later as he was completing an M.B.A. at Harvard.

With no interest in teaching, the standard course for historians, he had gone for that degree with the idea of earning a living as a foundation executive and writing history on the side. But royalties on his next book, "Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair," published in 1986, appearances as a summit analyst on CNN and lecturing have enabled him to make a living as a historian, without any other formal job.

He chose diplomatic history as a particular field because he wants in his work "to try to find in history, lessons that can help to guide leaders of our own times."

So what is the main lesson to be found in "The Crisis Years?"

Here is how Mr. Beschloss reads it:

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"On paper you have Kennedy and Khrushchev in power. And both wanted to relieve the harshness of the cold war, and both wanted to keep the nuclear arms race at as low a level as possible.

"But events and the worst parts of both of their natures caused those intentions to be foiled. In Kennedy's case: a lack of courage, before 1963, a tendency to feel that he would be risking too much politically by taking anything other than an orthodox cold-war stand on Berlin and Cuba. In Khrushchev's case: indulging his tendency to solve his problems with quick schemes that were never thought out, like missiles in Cuba."